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ABSTRACT

In an attempt to determine the impact of desegregation upon a rural Southern community, this paper chronicles the changes brought about by school desegregation in St. Mary Parish, Louisiana. Statistical data, geographical characteristics, and a description of the city and towns within St. Mary Parish are presented as background. An historical perspective of education in the area, primarily as it applied to blacks, is also provided. The stages of desegregation implementation, its effectiveness over a number of years, and black and white attitudes towards the process are described in detail for each of the parish's school systems. Specific actions taken by the respective communities and by the black and white contingents within these communities to encourage or discourage desegregation are included in these descriptions. Effects of desegregation on the students are also described. Tables showing statistical data and a list of references are included. (Author/EB)

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Profile of a Southern School District Prior to Desegregation

St. Mary Parish is an actual place in Louisiana, located on the Gulf of Mexico about 90 miles southwest of New Orleans in the south central part of the state. Its land area covers almost 387,000 acres plus an additional 140 square miles under inland water.[1] When racial segregation in the school system was ordered to be terminated, effects on the schools and community were profound. This paper chronicles these changes with the intent of describing the impact of desegregation upon a rural Southern community.

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Located within St. Mary Parish are Morgan City and the towns of Franklin, Berwick, Patterson, and Baldwin. Each municipality has experienced an unprecedented rate of growth, reflected in the 1970 population census. This census indicated that in the ten years between 1960 and 1970, the population of these municipalities increased as follows: "Patterson 50.8%; Baldwin 36.8%; Morgan City 22.5%; Franklin 7.5%; and Berwick 7.4%. The Parish as a whole experienced an increase of 24.4% in population over the 1960 Census."[2] In 1970, St. Mary Parish had a total population of 60,762. There was an urban population of 39,609 (65.2 percent) and a rural population of 21,153 (34.8 percent). The black population was 15,085 (25 percent).

The area encompassing Morgan City, Patterson, and Berwick is located at the confluence of the Atchafalaya River and the Intracostal Waterway, which spawns the vast petroleum and fishing industries of the Parish. Morgan City, only 25 miles from the Gulf of Mexico, is the shortest route to the Gulf for marine commerce. Franklin, the Parish Seat, is second only to Morgan City in population and has historically provided the economic impetus in the Parish. It is popularly known as the "Carbon Black Capital of the World." This product is used in the manufacture of rubber, paint, plastics, ink and paper chemicals. Franklin is also an area contributing to the production of sugar, oil, and salt. Baldwin, located in the western portion of the Parish, has been undergoing an industrial rebirth because of the construction of the Charenton Drainage and Navigation Canal, which skirts the town limits. The presence of this canal has inspired the construction of a $25 million generating unit by the Central Louisiana Electric Company.

St. Mary's agricultural economy is based on sugar cane; but corn, rice and soybeans are also grown.[3] Of the 60,000 acres devoted to crops in the

parish, sugar cane production utilizes 40,000 acres. More than 150 million pounds of sugar, valued at close to $12 million, was produced annually from 1960-1970. In addition to the extensive sugar cane plantations located in the Parish, there are about six sugar mills which produce about 17 percent of Louisiana's entire sugar production.

There are 215 farms in the Parish, with 61 full owners--44 owned by whites, and 17 by blacks. There are 66 part-owned farms--45 owned by whites, and 21 by blacks. In addition, there are 88 tenant farms, which include sharecroppers and all classes of tenants, 72 white and 16 black.[4] In addition to planting sugar cane, St. Mary farmers grew about 3,200 acres in rice, 22,000 acres in pastures, and 2,200 acres in corn.

St. Mary is one of the most highly forested parishes in South Louisiana. About 30 percent or 112,300 acres is in commercial forest land.[5] There are 15 oil companies located in St. Mary Parish. The Parish ranks fifth in the production of natural gas among Louisiana parishes.[6] The production of oil and gas in the parish has generated the growth of a vast industrial complex of supporting industries, such as drilling companies, oil field service and supply houses, and tool and instrument companies. These firms are located on the eastern end of the Parish, where at least 186 industries are located.

The carbon industries are located on the western end of the Parish. These plants are Columbia Carbon Company, Cabot Corporation, and United Carbon Company. The Cabot Corporation, the world's largest producer of carbon black, provides employment for over 400 people. Another industry in the Parish is salt mining; the largest salt mine is Belle Isle Mine. Another commercial attraction is marketing of shrimp, which is a multi-million dollar industry; over three million pounds of shrimp are marketed in the Parish annually.

The swamps and woodlands of the Parish produce a large portion of the muskrat, mink, nutria, and otter trapped every year in the state. The floor beneath the bays and lakes contains the oyster reefs that produce an almost inexhaustible supply of calcium carbonate for the users of the Parish.

St. Mary is unique among Parishes in the state because it operates almost like two separate parishes. The Calumet Canal divides the Parish (See Figure 1) into East and West, with the two sections operating as distinct entities. The Parish is further broken up into 10 administrative districts known as Wards. School Board Members and Police Jurors are elected from these areas. East St. Mary is industrial, while West St. Mary is agricultural. Because of this distinction, all governmental agencies operate on an east-west basis. This east-west division of the Parish had an important effect in desegregating the schools.

Education in Retrospect: St. Mary Parish

The end of the Reconstruction period brought little improvement in the economic and social conditions of southern blacks. Despite the opposition many white southerners had to black schools, there seemed to be a greater tolerance toward the improvement of black educational institutions than to other agencies which offered services to blacks. The pursuit of education, therefore, came to be one of the great preoccupations of blacks, and education was viewed by many as the greatest single opportunity to escape the increasing prosciptions and indignities that a renascent South was heaping upon Blacks.[7]

Black educational leaders in Louisiana saw that the problem of education for blacks was complicated by the physical separation of the races. This

greatly influenced the type of education to which blacks were exposed. With this thought in mind, educational leaders in St. Mary Parish, following the lead of Booker T. Washington, became advocates of industrial or vocational education. The early leaders were aware of the racial climate of the State of Louisiana; therefore, they were careful not to agitate too forcefully for changes that they wanted made. However, as time passed, they pushed equally for better opportunities for black school children and black teachers.

The conditions that marked the life of black people in St. Mary Parish and the entire South are a matter of historical fact. The Brown decision in 1954 found St. Mary Parish, along with most of the other school systems in Louisiana and throughout the South, totally segregated in personnel, student body, and every other aspect of community life. Schools for black youngsters were by far inferior to those attended by their white counterparts.[8]

The following statement made by T. H. Harris, State Superintendent of Education, will help to explain the drive and aspirations of black educators throughout the State of Louisiana that would eventually lead to Gwen Boudreaux v. St. Mary Parish School Board, et. al., in 1965.

> At every conference with the officers of the General Education Board, the subject of Negro schools was discussed. We, the Southern State Superintendents of Education, admitted that the Negro schools were poor indeed. In most cases Negro churches were used for several school houses, and the only equipment in the church were the benches used in the church services. The school term was from two to four months, and teachers were uneducated and wholly unequipped to instruct children. The school authorities paid no attention to the Negro schools, rarely if ever visiting them or advising with Negro teachers. The salaries paid the Negro teachers ran from $20-$50 a month and that was more than they earned.[9]

J. A. Hernendez, Supervisor of Education in St. Mary Parish, one of the early black leaders in the Parish, corroborated Superintendent Harris's statement as follows:

> Early education in St. Mary Parish for black youngsters was not really education. It was an attempt at appeasing the black population. At one time, there were as many as 28 so called "black schools" in the parish, located in halls, churches and make shift buildings provided by concerned individuals.[10]

The curriculum in black schools was restricted to the basic subjects of reading, writing, and arithmetic. Every attempt to broaden the curriculum by black teachers and administrators was met with the excuse "there is no money" despite the fact that taxes were constantly collected. However, the tax dollar was not distributed evenly for the education of black and white children.[11]

In 1958, the Louisiana Revised Statutes 17:336, also known as Act 336, gave the Governor the authority to:

1. Close any racially mixed school.
2. Close any public school which under court order is required to admit students of the Negro and white race by a certain definite date.
3. Reopen any closed school, as above, when in his opinion it can be operated as a racially separated institution.
4. Declare any closed school indefinitely closed that cannot be reopened under the conditions of number 3 above after reasonable time or at the close of the school term when such order closing the school was issued.[12]

In the mid sixties when the parents of Gwen Boudreaux filed suit seeking to desegregate the public schools of St. Mary Parish, there were a total of 27 segregated schools in operation, 17 white and 10 black.[13] Anticipating the outcome of the court suit, the St. Mary Parish School Board, meeting on September 16, 1965, unanimously adopted a resolution that changed the policy and procedures to govern all future assignments and transfers of pupils within the school system and under the jurisdiction of the Board:

I. All school attendance zones are hereby abolished.

II. All initial pupil assignment as presently existing will be deemed adequate, subject, however, to the following:

> Transfers, commencing as of the day of adoption of this resolution, and original assignment, except those already made for the school year 1965-66, will be made.

III. If any paragraph of these rules and procedures shall be held by any court of competent jurisdiction to be invalid for any reason, the remaining paragraphs shall continue in full force and effect. If a portion clause or sentence of any paragraph shall be held by any court of competent jurisdiction to be invalid for any reason, the remainder of such paragraph shall continue in full force and effect.[14]

In 1965, the school board adopted a cumbersome application for change of pupil assignment. Many blacks believed that the intent of this form, commonly known as "Freedom of Choice Form," was to discourage black cross-overs. The notion of freedom of choice in 1965 did not seem to enjoy the respectability it does today. Whites in St. Mary Parish were heard to say: "They have their own schools. Let's keep them separate and equal."[15]

On July 13, 1967, Superintendent Boudreaux reported to the Board on the registration of pupils in the parish during the Freedom of Choice period from May 15, 1967, through June 15, 1967. Choices requested were as follows:

1. White pupils requesting to remain in the same schools 7,409.

   White pupils requesting change of schools 564.

2. Black pupils requesting remain in the same schools 3,084.

   Black pupils requesting change of schools 441.

3. Black pupils requesting to remain in formerly all white schools 93.

4. Black pupils requesting to transfer from formerly all white schools 4.

5. Black pupils requesting to transfer from all black schools to formerly all white schools 394.

By 1968, the slow tempo of desegregation of the public schools of St. Mary Parish was accelerated by concerned black citizens seeking additional relief through the courts. A survey conducted by the Public Affairs Research Council showed that in the fall of 1968 there were 739 blacks enrolled in formerly all-white schools. There were no whites enrolled in black schools,[17] suggesting that Freedom of Choice was not dismantling the dual system in St. Mary Parish. The survey also showed that there were 53 black teachers working in formerly all-white schools and 12 white teachers working in black schools.[18] In 1969, there were 16,436 students enrolled in the public schools of St. Mary Parish; 10,295 whites and 5,511 blacks.[19] There were some white parents who questioned the educational preparation of black teachers that were teaching in formerly all-white schools. However, Table I shows that the professional training of black teachers was equal to that of whites.

The problem and effect of pupil desegregation varied considerably among school systems. One of the principal reasons for this, as we shall see in St. Mary Parish, was the different racial composition of the system. In 1969, the St. Mary Parish School Board submitted what was felt by them to be a proposal to effect total school desegregation. The plan that was submitted for the eastern end of the parish served to eliminate the remaining vestige of the dual system of education, since the board members from that end of the parish elected to pair the schools. In Morgan City, Sumpter Williams, the all black elementary and high school, was paired with Wyandotte Elementary and Morgan City High School. Wyandotte Elementary was to serve grades 1-4, and Sumpter Williams, grades 5 through 8.[20]

In Patterson, total desegregation was reached by zoning and pairing. Hattie A. Watts, the formerly all-black high school and elementary school,

Table I

Professional Training of St. Mary Parish Classroom Teachers in Elementary and High Schools*

Teachers	Less Than One Year College	One Year College	Two Years College	Three Years College	Bachelors Degree	Masters Degree	Masters Degree Plus 30 Hours Graduate Study	Specialist PhD or an EdD Education Degree	Total
White	10	13	21	38	215	22	3	--	322
Black	-	-	5	4	111	17	1	--	138
Totals	10	13	26	42	326	39	4	00	460

Professional Training of St. Mary Parish Classroom Teachers in High School*

Teachers	Less Than One Year College	One Year College	Two Years College	Three Years College	Bachelors Degree	Masters Degree	Masters Degree Plus 30 Hours Graduate Study	Specialist PhD or an EdD Education Degree	Total
White	--	--	1	3	112	30	11	--	157
Black	--	--	--	4	51	4	1	--	60
Total	00	00	1	7	163	34	12	--	217

* State Department of Education 1969 Bulletin No. 1160, p. 310, 312, 313, and 322.

was paired with Patterson High, the formerly all-white high school and elementary school. After pairing, Hattie Watts became the elementary school with grades 1-3, and Patterson High remained the high school with grades 4 through 12. The seventh and eighth grade students in the Bayou Vista community in Ward 5 were assigned to Patterson High.[21] Because of the small percentage of blacks located on the eastern end of the parish, the schools remained predominantly white, with a ratio of 81 percent white and 19 percent black.

The western end of the parish presented a strikingly different plan, mainly because, with total desegregation of all the schools (with the exception of Centerville High), all would have become predominantly black. Therefore, the board members adopted a plan that was to cause a great deal of unrest in West St. Mary Parish. For example, in Franklin the plan required pairing the four elementary schools--one formerly all-black (grades 1-8) and three formerly all-white (grades 1-7). The plan was as follows:

> All first grade pupils who would have normally gone to any one of the four schools would attend Willow Street Elementary (formerly black).
>
> All eighth grade pupils who would have normally attended Willow Street or Franklin High would attend Park Avenue High School (formerly black).
>
> All other elementary pupils enrolled in grades 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7 would attend the same school they attended during the 1968-67 school year.[22]

Other elementary schools in the Franklin area were affected in the same manner. However, the Franklin area became the hotbed of racial antagonism on the school desegregation issue.

The three public high schools in the western section of St. Mary Parish were Centerville High, Park Avenue High, and Franklin High. Franklin High and Park Avenue were located in the city of Franklin, and Centerville

High in the Town of Centerville six miles east of Franklin. The plan to desegregate Centerville High required that all pupils residing in Ward 4 exclusively would attend Centerville High. Prior to this plan, Ward 4 black children of high school age were bused past Centerville High to Park Avenue High in Franklin. The black elementary age students were bused to Vurdenville Elementary.[23] The proposal had all 9th grades in Western St. Mary Parish, excepting those in Ward 4, attending Franklin High. Eighth grade pupils attended Park Avenue. The tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grade students of both high schools attended the same schools as they did in the 1968-69 session.

When the plans were finally announced to the public, they were received with some measure of relief in the black community because rumors had led to fears of loss of schools and wholesale dismissals of friends and relatives who served as school employees. However, a very vocal sector of the white community was openly hostile toward this procedure of desegregating the public schools of St. Mary Parish.

On Thursday, August 14, 1969, over 100 irate white parents attended the School Board meeting to express their displeasures with the Board and its desegregation plans. The parents wanted to know why the selection of only three grades (namely; the 1st, 8th, and 9th grades in the Franklin area) were to be denied "freedom of choice," while the other grades in the area were allowed to continue to enjoy the privilege of selecting the school they were to attend.[24] Some parents expressed the opinion that if freedom of choice were not available to the local school system, there should be total mixing of the races instead of, as some put it, discrimination against three grades. The School Board responded that since "freedom of choice" was what most parents favored, they (the board) elected to choose the route that would

result in the greatest possible amount of freedom of choice--in 9 of the 12 grades.[25]

With the beginning of the 1969-70 school session, the Citizens for Freedom, Inc. (CFFI), through its Vice President Merlyn Weeks, requested that the Board close the schools in West St. Mary Parish to give the group time to try its legal suit to return to freedom of choice.[26] Meanwhile, the CFFI called for a boycott of the black schools to which designated grades had been assigned. During the first four days of school, less than one percent of the white pupils in grades one and eight showed up at Willow Street Elementary and Park Avenue High School.[27]

At a large rally held in the gymnasium of Franklin High School, the legal advisor and the board members of the CFFI suggested that the total boycott be amended to a "controlled" boycott plan. At this point Carl Young, of Centerville, an outspoken member of the Board of Education, suggested that the citizens of West St. Mary Parish should take whatever action necessary to close down the schools altogether, until freedom of choice was re-instituted.[28] At the same meeting it was suggested that parents with children in first and eighth grades should send their children to the school of their choice, to determine the schools' reaction to the children once they were there. The parents used this approach. When contacted about this procedure, Assistant Superintendent Medine declared the position of the school board by stating:

> The school board was powerless to register or provide any educational services for those students at schools other than where they were assigned. Students and their accompanying parents are being regarded as "guests" of the school only, and as such--are welcome to stay there as long as they do not interfere with the orderly operation of the schools involved.[29]

With the organization of West End Academy (a private segregated school for whites only) by foes of desegregation, some of the political and social

pressures were taken off of the school board and administrative personnel of the schools. However, for the remainder of the school year all of West St. Mary Parish festered. Emotional outbreaks by parents, observed by children, seriously affected the attitudes of the students, making it difficult, if not impossible, to conduct a meaningful educational program.

On July 6, 1970, the St. Mary Parish School Board was ordered by Federal District Judge Richard J. Putnam to re-evaluate the desegregation plan for West St. Mary Parish in light of recent court rulings and submit a written report to the court for study. On August 4, 1970, the suit seeking total integration of schools in St. Mary Parish resulted in the pairing of all public schools with one exception. This exception was the Glenco-Thomas Gibbs school area, where freedom of choice remained in effect because, in the event the two schools were paired (because of the respective sizes of the schools), it would be necessary to put grades 1, 2, and 3 at Glenco Elementary School and grades 4 through 8 at Gibbs Elementary School. Because of the totally black student body at Gibbs, the racial composition of the Glenco School would become 88 percent Negro and 15 percent white instead of the present 47% white and 53% black. Clearly, if these schools were paired, there would be a regression in the percentage of integration in the Glenco-Gibbs area. Further, it is significant to note that when the schools were paired, as indicated above, there would be 32 white children at Glenco Elementary School with 237 Negro children. At Gibbs Elementary School there would be 51 white children and 295 Negro children. Therefore, it was recommended for the Glenco-Gibbs area of St. Mary Parish that the Freedom of Choice system be maintained for the racial composition in the Glenco Elementary School to be maintained also.[30]

Of the three public high schools in West St. Mary Parish, Park Avenue High School became a Junior High, and Centerville and Franklin High became the two remaining high schools in the western sector. The plan provided that all high school students who resided in Ward 4, exclusively, "will attend Centerville High School."[31] The proposed plan resulted in total desegregation in Centerville High School, as shown in Table 2.

The proposal for the two high schools located in Franklin made Park Avenue the junior high school (grades 8 and 9) and Franklin High, the senior high school (grades 10-12). The proposed plan resulted in total desegregation of the high school and junior high school students of the Franklin area.

In 1970, all the physical facilities of segregation had disappeared in St. Mary Parish. The fight against desegregation was fought viciously in the courts, in the coffee shops, at dinner tables, and even in the hallways of schools. Nevertheless, desegregation did come to St. Mary Parish; but the 1970-71 and 1971-72 school sessions were horrendous. These two sessions were marked by a concerted effort on the part of a small vocal group of white parents who felt that some black administrators should be replaced with whites. There were some minor disturbances caused by students at the various schools, but worse, the educational programs of some schools were constantly disrupted by parents reacting to rumor of knifings, fights, bomb threats, walk-outs, and threats of violence.

It was apparent that education in St. Mary Parish would never be the same. However, the overriding question was whether this conversion to a unitary school system would better serve the pupils of the public schools. And, since one of the purposes of the schools is to prepare youngsters for an ever changing world, how would this change in system affect the achievement of those involved?

Table II

Integration Schedule of the Centerville High School
Reflecting Numbers and Percentages of
Students in School

1970-1971
Centerville High

Grade Level	White No.	Black No.
9	38	31
10	28	13
11	23	22
12	17	9
9-12	106	75

1970-1971 Integration Schedule for Pairing the Eighth Grade of
Park Avenue High School and the 9th Grade of Franklin High
and for Pairing
Franklin High with Park Avenue High School

Grade Level	Franklin		Park Avenue	
	White	Black	White	Black
	No.	No.	No.	No.
8			132	206
9			121	279
10	171	222		
11	138	233		
12	147	175		
8-12	456	630	253	485

Table II[32]

A study of the impact of desegregation on the academic achievement of seniors in this school district was done.[33] This study revealed that desegregation adversely effected the achievement of white students and somewhat enhanced the achievement of black students. If the disruption and upheaval had not been so great in the white community, it is believed by some that the decline in white achievement would not have occurred.

Desegregation involves social and physical changes which affect everyone. It follows then that one of the most important first steps in meeting the challenge of desegregation is preparing the community for change. When school and other public officials fail to act as facilitators in binding a community together in attempts to understand the hopes, fears, biases, ideals, and values of all concerned, then disruption--of the schools and of the community--is inevitable.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Facts About Fabulous St. Mary Parish. (Franklin, Louisiana, St. Mary Parish Police Jury), page 1 (mimeographed).

[2]1970 Census Report.

[3]Ibid., page 4.

[4]Ibid., page 4.

[5]W. D. Curtis, Statistical Data and Trends in Agriculture of St. Mary Parish (1967), page 26.

[6]Facts About Fabulous St. Mary. op. cit., page 6.

[7]John Hope Franklin. From Slavery to Freedom (New York: Vintage Book Company, 1967), page 382.

[8]T. H. Harris. The Memoirs of T. H. Harris (Baton Rouge: Bureau of Education, Louisiana State University, 1963).

[9]J. A. Hernandez. Personal Interview (Franklin, Louisiana: January 14, 1974).

[10]Clifford Smith. Personal Interview (Franklin, Louisiana: January 14, 1974).

[11]Ibid.

[12]Louisiana Education Association Legislative Bulletin, Number 2, (1960).

[13]"Schools in Transition," Public Affairs Research Council of Louisiana, Inc. (Baton Rouge: Volume 1, Number 6: January, 1972), page 7.

[14]Minutes of St. Mary Parish School Board (Franklin, Louisiana: September 16, 1965).

[15]J. A. Davison. Personal Interview (Jeanerette, Louisiana: January 15, 1974).

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[17]Improving Quality During School Desegregation. op. cit., page 4.

[18]Ibid., page 4.

[19]Gwen Boudreaux v. St. Mary Parish School Board. Stipulations Entered into by and Between Plaintiff and Defendants Pursuant to Court Order Rendered on July 20, 1969, page 1.

[20]Ibid.

[21]Proposal to Effect Total School Integration in the St. Mary Parish Public School System (Franklin, Louisiana: St. Mary Parish School Board, 1969), page 7.

[22]Ibid., page 5.

[23]Ibid., page 25.

[24]Ibid., page 29.

[25]KFRA Radio Logs (Franklin, Louisiana: August 15, 1969).

[26]Ibid., August 15, 1969.

[27]Ibid.

[28]KFRA, September 12, 1969.

[29]KFRA, September 5, 1969.

[30]KFRA, September 8, 1969.

[31]Proposal to Effect Total Integration. op. cit., pages 2-3.

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6. Ibid, 113.

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27. Ibid., p. 242.

28. Coleman, pp. 307 and 331.

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